

Menstrual Taboos: A Gynocritical Study of Menstrual Myths in the Selected Novels of Shashi Deshpande and Bapsi Sidhwa

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Abstract

This paper analyses the traumatic practices of menstruation within Indian subcontinent with an indepth study of Indian novelist Shashi Deshpande's "The Dark Holds No Terror" and Bapsi Sidhwa's "The Crow Eaters." The present study tries to bring forth the vices existing in our Indian culture and the cultural practices of menstruation as a taboo, how women all over the world relate to their experiences and how it becomes a mark of trauma for them. The paper captures the complexity of Indian Brahmin and Parsi culture how culture as a whole leads to this diminution of women at large and how factors like culture, education, society, religion, caste construct our sexuality on the basis of which various practices take place.

KEYWORDS: Trauma, Discrimination, Untouchable, Other, Taboo, Patriarchy, Menstruation.

Introduction

"Logic has nothing to do with oppression...if men could menstruate and women could not ...menstruation would become an enviable, worthy, masculine, event..." (Steinam)

A Woman is neither corporally nor pensively a sub or frail compared to man yet she has always been overlooked and considered as other. Since time immemorial in human evolution she has been dealing with this mediocrity and has never been given the equal status, and has never been perceived as a human with her own personality as compared to man. An optional status has always been provided to her. Ever since the dawn of human evolution there has always been a struggle to emancipate women from this patriarchal oppression that has depreciated women to a triviality.

According to anthropologists Thomas Buckley and Alma Gottlieb, cross-cultural study shows that, while taboos about menstruation are nearly universal, and while many of these involve notions of uncleanness (ritual impurity), numerous menstrual traditions "bespeak quite different, even opposite,

purposes and meanings." (Thomas C.T. Buckley). Since Vedic period our society has confined women within their quarters and has always imposed certain ideas and doctrines over them which are just the social and political standards that have caused an injustice to them. (Chawla). This injustice has been prevalent on various grounds whether biological or social. Ever since human evolution there existed only the biological difference but this biologically given sex as Butler writes, "sex is biological gender is social", became a mark of discrimination which has led women to decay so much so that it has almost become a trauma and eventually it gives rise to problems like stigma, body shaming, etc . Women after this no longer see themselves as a living entity with her identity, they themselves become a victim of this oppression, their sex becomes a mark of guilt for them. For menstruating women the process of menstrual seclusion became a process of learning. The evolution of women's consciousness was due specifically to separation of light and dark. Menstruants were not allowed to look at light in fear of destroying it and sending everyone back into chaos, creating a way to retain the knowledge gained through these rites as they had not yet discovered language. (Grahm)

Since late 1900's feminists have been fighting against this issue with a motive to bring equality. "It is not the actual process of expelling blood that becomes the problem when not controlled, but the disruption of the codes... it is thus not the lack of cleanliness or health that causes abjection but what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders positions, rules". Menstruators are seen as abject if menstrual codes are not followed... (Kristeva)

This paper investigates the intricacies of our culture and society and the social representations of menstruation that has down the line brought decay to women. Secondly the paper explores how gender and certain ideological factors impact the meaning of menstruation worldwide and more specifically within Indian subcontinent and how women relate their experiences on similar grounds.

Through a dark study of two Indian subcontinent writers, Bapsi Sidhwa's "THE CROW EATERS" and Shashi Deshpande's "THE DARK HOLDS NO TERRORS", this paper emphasizes the various factors i.e, cultural beliefs, education, domestic violence, forced marriages and pregnancy, body shaming and a denial of female sexuality are socially constructed. The purpose of this paper is to investigate, interrogate, examine, critique and demystify gender stereotypes that are socially constructed by our culture and religion to suppress and subordinate women. Also how culture as a complex network of dynamic meanings and relationships puts women's role in a dark, as a result their history remains undocumented, unexplored, or even lost. The paper aims at a comparative study of Deshpande's "THE DARK HOLDS NO TERRORS", and Sidhwa's "THE CROW EATERS", and how menstruation is manifested as a "TABOO" in our society and the very unusual dichotomy in women's treatment. These

two studies depict similar experiences has put forth the different ways in which this practice continues and how these practices differ culturally but the grounds of which always remain the same. Despite living in the era which has brought people a rapid lifestyle and new advancement, the explicit amount of superstition still holds the minds of humans. Discrimination on the basis of sex, gender, colour, caste still pervades in our society. This discernment against menstruating women has always been prevalent in every culture. Since ancient times menstruation has always been considered as a taboo more specifically in developing nations where it is considered as embarrassing, impure because of the lack of information, and some damaging misconceptions which results in menstrual stigma.

Widely acclaimed as a prominent writer and a recipient of the Sahitya Akademi award Shashi Deshpande is an Indian novelist, born in Karnataka. Her eye catching work “THE DARK HOLDS NO TERROR” (1980) and “THAT LONG SILENCE” for which she was awarded with Padma Shri (2009) has carved a niche for her in the English canon. Similarly Sidhwa’s works “THE ICE CANDY MAN”, “WATER: A NOVEL”, “THE BRIDE”, portray her women characters which articulates the anxieties, intricacies, dilemmas faced by women at large. Sidhwa and Deshpande belong to that group of women writers who have been hailed for their genuine depiction of a women’s life. All of their works are satires on society’s behavior towards women. Their portrayal of naked realities and stark truths with a subtle irony and humor has succeeded in presenting the ignoble picture that stings our life. Though these two writers belong to two different nations but they share a common history because once they constituted one country. In the present context both of them are a part of same continent and bound by a culture that is predominantly patriarchal. Both Sidhwa and Deshpande’s works depict how modern women adjust to new balances required between old age traditions and modernity.

Bapsi Sidhwa is one of the most finest and acknowledged writer from Pakistan. Born in Karachi, Sind, British India she shares a Parsi and Zoroastrian background and is now a resident of United States. Her works deal with both pre and post colonial period of the Indian subcontinent and gives an ironic description of the abuses against women. Sidhwa was an active women’s rights spokesperson and represents Pakistan in the Asian women’s congress of 1975. In 1991, she was honored with the Sitara-i-imitiz, Pakistan’s highest national honor in arts.

The existential struggle of women is well portrayed in her works through her characters like Shanta- the Ayah in the “ICE CANDY MAN” and Chuyia in the “WATER: A NOVEL”. Her 1978 novel “THE CROW EATERS” which is set in Pakistan gives a vivid description of the oppression faced by women at large in a patriarchal society. The character Putli, wife of the main character Freddy Junglewala faces discrimination because of menstruation. She undergoes discrimination during her periods and is

considered impure. Sidhwa though her portrayal of Putli has tried to bring into light how women are oppressed on these biological grounds and how this suppression gets instilled in our mind since birth that we accept it to be natural. Despite knowing the fact that these notions are social construction putli is never able to resent them instead she herself becomes a victim of this oppression. She starts finding a solace in this separation as it is the only time to rest and find time for herself. As much as she enjoys this segregation, isolation she knows that during her periods she is detested by everyone and is considered as other. She is not allowed to touch or talk to anyone during this period her state is considered as impure as it would destroy everything by her touch. Putli's situation explains the hypocracies of a patriarchal society who govern women by a set of rules and discriminate them on certain unjustifiable grounds. Putli represents the class of women who cherish patriarchal rules and conventions and leave no stones unturned to abide by their rules without any resentment. Such practices are manifested through various actions where putli is trapped by these patriarchal boundations and where she remains ignored of certain things she cannot resist.

“Every Parsee household has its other room, specially reserved for women. Thither they are banished for the duration of the unholy state. Putli quite enjoyed her infrequent visits to the other room. It was the only chance she ever has to rest. And since this seclusion was religiously enforced, she was able to enjoy her idleness without guilt”.

Putli's seclusion during her periods gives a sort of solace to her which she couldn't find other days she blindly adheres to it thus making herself a victim of this oppression. Sidhwa's depiction sound genuine when she writes,

“She was served meals in her cubicle. A tin plate and spoon, reserved for the occasion, were handed over by the servant boy. She knew she could'nt help herself to pickles or preserves for they would spoil at her touch. Flowers, too, were known to wilt when touched by women in her condition. The family was permitted to speak to her through closed doors, or, in emergency, even directly. Provided they bathed from head to foot and purified themselves afterwards”.

Sidhwa sought to highlight her voice against the condemnation of female body by plethora of religious texts. The very idea that a women's body is impure and contaminated is common to many religions worldwide. Sidhwa here highlights the major superstitious beliefs and customs of a Brahmin and Parsi family which are complete dismal and how women in turn accept this subordination unquestionably. Menstruating women in Brahmin culture are restricted to visit temples or touch anyone she is usually shifted to another room referred to as the other room. In the narrative Sidhwa has associated

menstruation with female body as something dirty, impure, and untouchable. To protect the members of her family she abides by this and lives alone so that her shadow might not accidentally fall on someone while they are praying and make them impure.

Menstruation in “THE CROW EATERS” is manifested as impure and accursed which forces women to be segregated during her menses (impurity). Parsi and Brahmin culture are highly patriarchal due to the male privileged culture and for its brutal treatment of women which finds resonance in the character Putli. The mother in the novel has to face all these religious challenges she remains aloof and away from her family members during her menstrual cycle and this practice she does on the grounds that she has to protect her family members from her shadow. What gives a promotion to this practice is the mindset that women develop facing it since their childhood. Women themselves do not see it as oppression but a mark of relaxation that they get for few days. They take it as a holiday which they get to rest and then get ready for their next few weeks. This autonomy is celebrated by women at large in parsi community neglecting the fact that their bodies are under a threat and they are being objectified by calling them certain names “it’s her first day” such reminiscences find resonance in these practices where we find women becoming a victim of this oppression and neglecting their logic and yielding to norms of the society.

Traditional norms and beliefs, socio economic conditions, and physical infrastructure, influence practices related to menstruation. A report by Bhardwaj and Pakar says: “In accordance with cultural traditions, menstruating women abstain from cooking and salting food. In certain parts women aren’t allowed to live in the residence with other family members, instead they stay separately...there is separate door for her to use. A menstruating Hindu woman has to cook her own food and eat separately.”

The novel “THE DARK HOLDS NO TERROR” is an elaborate description of women in Indian society and how on certain grounds they are discriminated and considered other. The novel centre mainly on the childhood experiences of the character SARU (SARITA), and how she is controlled on gender basis and how traditional beliefs and attitudes govern the behavior of women which are so deeply internalized that an educated woman like Saru cannot resist to it. This practice becomes evident when they easily agree to get married and accept their role to serve her family. In spite of being a lady doctor Saru is full of detest and self hatred she becomes a construct of the codes and restrictions of society. She becomes a victim of these rituals and almost reaches madness. Menstruation is one such factor that separates females from males. This factor being biological becomes a mark of social discrimination and is practiced to such an extent that women are considered as a sign of impurity and pollution. The character Saru here goes

through this major issue where she is reminded of her body as smelly and toxic, “a dark, damp, smelly hole.” Her early childhood memories when she was reminded of her body by her mother as shameful “you had to be ashamed of yourself even in the presence of your own father”, these experiences gets reinforced when her husband violates her body as dark and damp. Menstruation in the case of Saru as depicted seems to be highly patriarchally practiced when we find Saru in a state of guilt and shame

“The separation from the family for three days during menstruation, the feeling of being a pariah...for my touch was ...”

Deshpande through the character of Saru has tried to point out how these grounds suffer mother daughter relationship, how women because of less knowledge becomes a self victim of this oppression and how this practice is being practiced by male dominated society at large which has some standards to follow so much so that women themselves start looking at their body with a shame and guilt. This is exactly seen in Saru’s mother who tries to impose certain restrictions on her which are common to almost all Indian cultures, like not visiting temples, not talking about it openly, calling it that period. Saru’s mother seems quite patriarchal in her treatment of her daughter and is a vivid description of how society rules women at large.

Conclusion

The knowledge gained from previous discussion regarding menstrual practices depicted in the works of Shashi Deshpande and Bapsi Sidhwa suggests the feminists view of the writers who have tried to bring the issue of menstruation into light and how it affects women at large and specifically within Indian subcontinent and its various consequences which finds resonance in the characters like Saru and Putli. The researcher here aims to study the narratives to achieve an understanding of taboos existing in our society. Sexism has affected women to a large extent so much so that it has almost become an everyday practice. The paper aims to study the sexual discrimination faced by women at large on the basis of their biological difference and captures the complexity of cultures of Parsis and the Brahmins which gets manifested in the works of Shashi Deshpande and Bapsi Sidhwa. Both of these writers have been a hard core feminists and a critique of this men bound society, the researcher through a comparative study of these two writers has attempted to highlight the writers’s views on menstruation practices and how social and cultural settings create an environment for these grounds to become obvious.

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